

TRENDING: AFGHANISTAN | SPACE | MIDDLE EAST | TERRORISM | CHINA | CLIMATE | PENTAGON

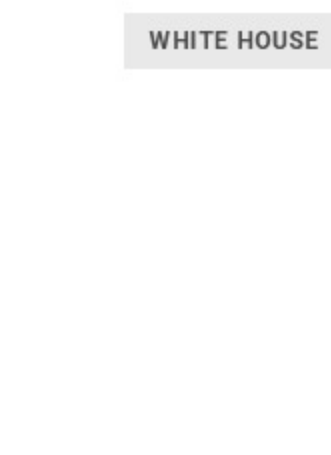


A service member prepares a COVID-19 vaccination dose on Feb. 4, 2021. U.S. AIR FORCE / JOSHUA J. SEYBERT

THREATS

One-Third of US Troops Are Refusing the COVID Vaccine. History May Help Explain Why

After botching anthrax shots decades ago, the Pentagon's hands are tied. Only the president can order troops to take new vaccines.



BY ELIZABETH HOWE
ASSISTANT EDITOR,
DEFENSE ONE

FEBRUARY 17, 2021



CORONAVIRUS

PERSONNEL

PENTAGON

WHITE HOUSE

U.S. troops are required to take many vaccinations before they enlist or deploy abroad, but the COVID-19 shot is still not among them. The terms of an "emergency use authorization" — the type of federal approval that governs the COVID-19 vaccines presently being distributed in the United States — prevent the Defense Department from requiring its administration. But the lack of a mandate was a [topic of concern](#) in Congress on Wednesday, where members heard from senior military officials that around one-third of military personnel offered the vaccine have refused it. Changing that trend may require a direct order from the new commander in chief, President Joe Biden, and the reason has little to do with anti-vaxxer conspiracies.

Only about two-thirds of troops offered the vaccine have taken it, said Air Force Maj. Gen. Jeff Talliaferro, vice director of operations at the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in testimony before the House Armed Services Committee. Air Force Maj. Gen. Steven Nordhaus, director of operations at the National Guard Bureau said the Guard is seeing similar rates. "Our experience mirrors the preliminary data that we're seeing in other communities," added Joint Staff Surgeon Brig. Gen. Paul Friedrichs.

About 359,000 troops have received their first vaccine dose; about 147,000 of those have received a second dose, said Robert Salesses, acting assistant defense secretary for homeland defense and global security.

Defense officials aren't tracking why so many troops are turning down the vaccine.

"We don't have a system in place across the services to specifically track data for those individuals who for whatever reason are declining or deferring the vaccine," Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said at a briefing on Wednesday.

"Nobody is hiding data," Kirby said when asked about the HASC testimony. "There'd be no reason for us to hide data when we can tell you exactly how many people are getting the vaccines. If there's something more that was testified today, I promise I will get it to you, but nobody is trying to hide anything here."

The hesitation by some personnel may have deeper roots than anti-vaxxer sentiments. It wasn't all that long ago that the department required troops to take a vaccine that had far worse side effects than had previously been reported or tested.

Related articles

Russia Has a Vaccine. The World Has Questions
After a Month, Just 900 DHS Employees Have Received COVID Vaccine

During the Gulf War, the Defense Department asked for and the Federal Drug Administration established a special rule for military personnel that allowed command leadership to throw "informed consent" out the window for investigational new drugs, or IND, vaccines. The rule was meant to protect service members from "weaponized biological or chemical agents."

More than 300,000 doses of the IND vaccine [Anthrax Vaccine Absorbed \(AVA\)](#) were distributed during Operation Desert Storm, probably to more than 150,000 service members. Years later, in 1997, Defense Secretary William Cohen launched the Anthrax Vaccine Immunization Program, or AVIP, in response to concerns about new biological weaponry. That program had 522,529 service members vaccinated with 2,098,544 doses of AVA by November 2001.

Many of these troops began reporting medically unexplained symptoms. A 2002 Government Accountability Office investigation showed that 85 percent of those who received the anthrax vaccine experienced adverse effects — more than double the rate that the vaccine manufacturer claimed.

Today, a version of the anthrax vaccine that has faced decades of additional research is required for military personnel in certain occupational specialties. But the FDA's special rule for the blanket waiving of informed consent has long been adjusted. Today, only the president can authorize it and under very specific circumstances, a power reaffirmed in the 1999 Defense Authorization Act.

The Defense Department continues to face legal challenges from service members with medical conditions they believe are linked to the anthrax vaccine while carefully navigating the COVID-19 vaccines' distribution to troops.

"It's under an emergency use authorization," Kirby said Wednesday. "It hasn't achieved final FDA approval. So there's a real limit, legally, on making it mandatory for troops and their families."

Instead, Pentagon leaders seemingly are trying to lead by example. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin was among those who had been vaccinated against COVID-19. Kirby added that he has also received his first shot.

"The secretary's concern is primarily for the health and safety of the force. He's taken the vaccine. He did that after talking to his doctor and determining that was the right choice for him," Kirby said. "But he recognizes that these are individual decisions and individuals need to have these conversations with their doctors to determine if it's the right thing for them... Everybody is different."

As of Wednesday, the Pentagon reported 237,561 confirmed cases of COVID-19 across the force, of which 152,905 are military personnel. The pandemic has resulted in 281 Defense Department-affiliated fatalities.

Correction: An earlier version misattributed statements about Defense Department vaccination rates given by Maj. Gen. Jeff Talliaferro and Maj. Gen. Steven Nordhaus in their Feb. 17 House testimony.

SHARE THIS:

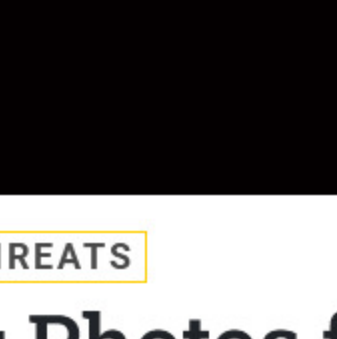
NEXT STORY: [Today's D Brief: Photos from Iraq attack; Troops & COVID; Spratleys FONOP; AFSOC plans new plane; And a bit more.](#)



Climate Change Is Already Disrupting The Military. It Will Get Worse, Officials Say



If China And The US Claim The Same Moon-Base Site, Who Wins?



Globe-Spanning Wargame Puts New Naval Concepts To The Test



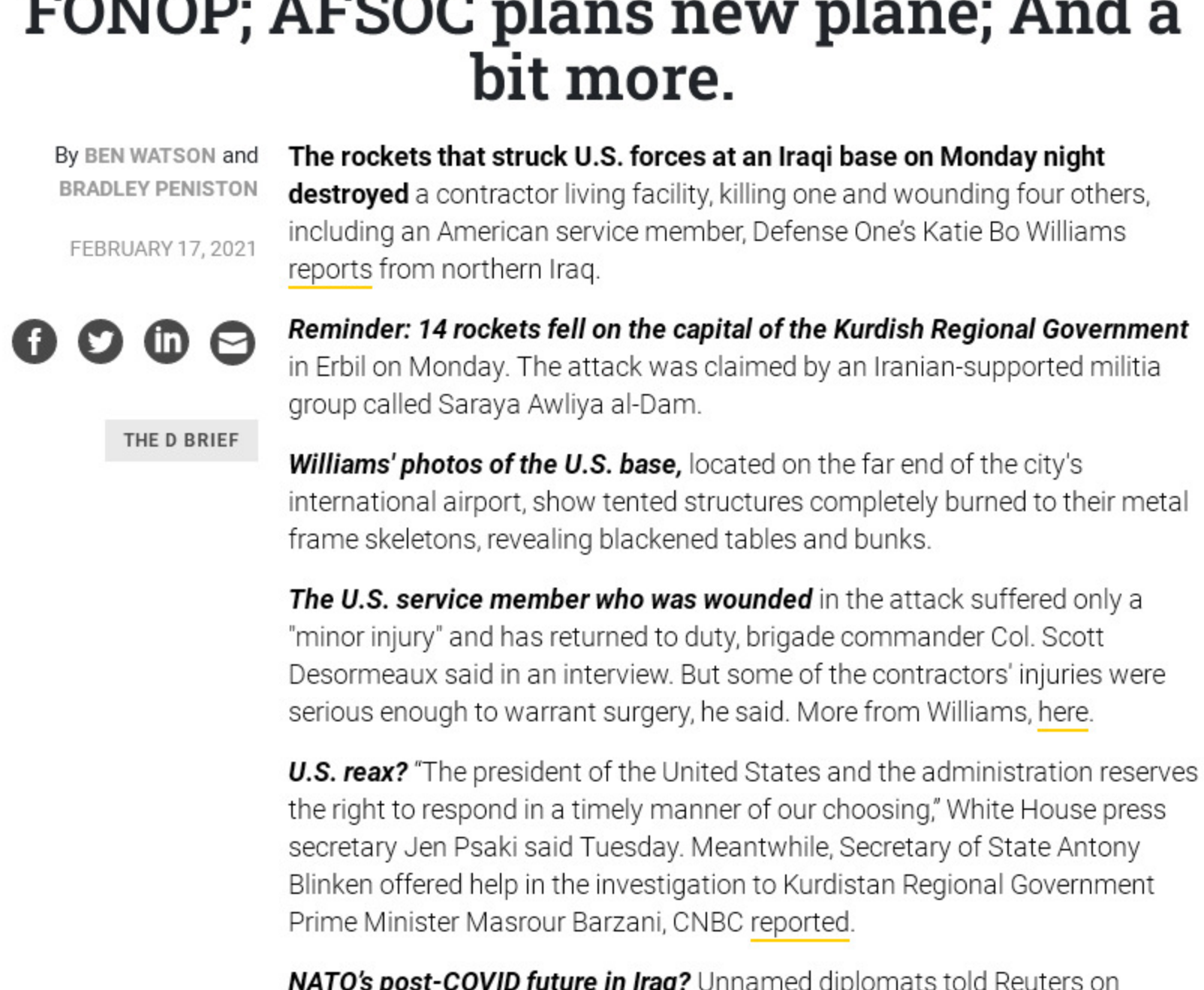
What Will Decrease Training Deaths? More Training, GAO Says



Defense One Ebook: The US Military's Quest For 50



Defense One Ebook: Future Of The Army



THREATS

Today's D Brief: Photos from Iraq attack; Troops & COVID; Spratleys FONOP; AFSOC plans new plane; And a bit more.

By BEN WATSON and
BRADLEY PENISTON

FEBRUARY 17, 2021



THE D BRIEF

The rockets that struck U.S. forces at an Iraqi base on Monday night destroyed a contractor living facility, killing one and wounding four others, including an American service member, Defense One's Katie Bo Williams [reports](#) from northern Iraq.

Reminder: 14 rockets fell on the capital of the Kurdish Regional Government in Erbil on Monday. The attack was claimed by an Iranian-supported militia group called Saraya Awliya al-Dam.

Williams' photos of the U.S. base, located on the far end of the city's international airport, show tented structures completely burned to their metal frame skeletons, revealing blackened tables and bunks.

The U.S. service member who was wounded in the attack suffered only a "minor injury" and has returned to duty, brigade commander Col. Scott Desormeaux said in an interview. But some of the contractors' injuries were serious enough to warrant surgery, he said. More from Williams, [here](#).

U.S. reax? "The president of the United States and the administration reserves the right to respond in a timely manner of our choosing," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Tuesday. Meantime, Secretary of State Antony Blinken offered help in the investigation to Kurdistan Regional Government Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, CNBC [reported](#).

NATO's post-COVID future in Iraq? Unnamed diplomats told Reuters on Monday the alliance is mulling a troop increase from 500 or so to possibly more than 4,000 once the pandemic eases, eventually. (In Tuesday's *D Brief*, we cited this possible troop increase, but mistakenly noted the changes were for Afghanistan instead of Iraq.) The plans are expected to be announced in an all-afghan video teleconference scheduled for Thursday. More from Reuters [here](#).

SecDef Austin previewed his NATO input in an op-ed Tuesday evening in the *Washington Post*. The heart and soul of his commentary is laid out in the first two graphs: "President Biden made it clear two weeks ago that diplomacy will be our primary means of engaging with the world, and it must be our first tool of choice. At the same time, the president also recognizes that all of our decisions and actions must be accomplished from a position of strength," Austin writes. "For the Defense Department, this means fielding a credible force, ready to back up the hard work of diplomacy. It also means working closely with our allies and partners to secure our common interests and promote our shared values abroad. Simply put, we cannot meet our responsibilities alone, nor should we try." Read on, [here](#).

FROM DEFENSE ONE

New Plane Key to Special Ops Vision for Africa, General Says // Marcus Weisgerber: Air Force Special Operations Command is planning flight demonstrations in coming months.

Defense One Radio, Ep. 87 // Defense One Staff: "The Daughters of Kobani" with Gayle Tzemach Lemmon.

Defense One Radio, Ep. 86 // Defense One Staff: Insurrection, social media, and the future of tech policy.

Don't Downgrade Space // Dan Tomanelli: Moves and hints portend a worrying shifting of priorities under the Biden administration.

What the Fear of China Is Doing to American Science // Rory Truex, The Atlantic: A campaign against Chinese scientists threatens the openness that defines U.S. universities.

Welcome to this Wednesday edition of The D Brief from Ben Watson and Bradley Peniston. Send us tips from your community [right here](#). And if you're not already subscribed to *The D Brief*, you can do that [here](#).

Three top defense officials are testifying this morning on the Pentagon's COVID-19 response. That starts at 11 a.m. ET before the House Armed Services Committee. Details [here](#). Watch a livestream [here](#).

Currently: U.S. troops are helping to vaccinate people in Los Angeles and Oakland, California. Active duty troops are also [starting up two more centers](#) in New York and Virginia, and will open a fifth in the U.S. Virgin Islands in early March, Air Force Gen. Glen Vanherck told reporters on Tuesday. [A total of 20 servicemember teams](#) have been authorized. (*Military Times*)

By the numbers: Some 487,855 people have died of COVID in the United States, more people than live in Colorado Springs, Colorado. An average of 2,183 people have died each day in the past week. But: "Over the past week, there has been an average of 81,200 cases per day, a decrease of 43 percent from the average two weeks earlier," the *New York Times* [reports](#).

This afternoon, Army Chief Gen. James McConville will elaborate on "great power competition" at the Heritage Foundation think tank in Washington. Here's what McConville told us on the very topic back in October. "When we take a look at great power, competition, [it's] very different than the type of combat that we've been used to which I talk about irregular warfare, or counterinsurgency, or kind of terrorism. We're talking about the ability to do large-scale, ground combat operations where we will be contested not only in the land, but in the sea, in the air, and cyber, and space. And so we train our troops to do this, we go out to combat training centers [and] we present them with multiple dilemmas that are going to allow them to operate in these types of environments."

In terms of China, McConville is fond of "long-range precision fires," the kind of weapons that can send an artillery round very close to a target [43 miles away](#), e.g. (More on that topic at *Defense One*, [here](#))

When it comes to Russia, McConville said, "having strong allies and partners in Europe is extremely important. And we do have very, very strong partners and a lot of the partners — whether it's Poland, Romania, Germany, really in all the Baltic states; they are very interested and working together with us. We share the same values; we share the same interests, and they just want an opportunity for freedom and for their people to have the opportunity to prosper. And so what we want to do is work with them to increase their capacities and their capabilities. You know, basically to deter any type of malign activity that's going on in the region. And that's really the goal that we have." More where that came from, [here](#).

China, India expected to join Iranian-Russian naval exercise. The wargames in the northern Indian Ocean, which began Tuesday, will include "shooting at sea and air targets and liberating hijacked ships, as well as search and rescue and anti-piracy operations," Al-Jazeera [reports](#).

BTW: "This is the second joint Russian-Iranian naval exercise since December 2019, when the two countries plus China held a drill in the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Oman," *Voice of America* [reports](#). Iran and China also participated in military exercises held in Russia in September 2020."

The U.S. Navy just sailed by the contested Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, the 7th Fleet announced overnight. China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines all claim some portion of the Spratleys. The guided-missile destroyer Russell conducted this latest "freedom of navigation operation," a full list of which you can find [here](#).

Why FONOP the Spratleys? China, Vietnam, and Taiwan require either permission or advance notification before a foreign military vessel passes through their territorial sea, the Navy said in the 7th Fleet announcement. "Under international law as reflected in the Law of the Sea Convention, the ships of all States — including their warships — enjoy the right of innocent passage through the territorial sea... By engaging in innocent passage without giving prior notification to or asking permission from any of the claimants, the United States challenged these unlawful restrictions imposed by China, Taiwan, and Vietnam."

Bigger picture: This latest FONOP "follows a joint exercise by two U.S. carrier groups in [the] South China Sea and another warship sailing near Chinese-controlled Paracel Islands earlier this month," Reuters [reports](#). "Those actions had suggested that the Biden administration was not about to scale back operations challenging Beijing's claims after the ramp-up seen during the Trump administration."

And finally today: The U.S. Navy is trying to break free of marathon deployments to the Persian Gulf. "After showing signs of improvement following two deadly collisions in 2017, the Navy is again under pressure to provide aircraft carrier presence to the Middle East," *Defense News*' David Larter [writes](#). It's a decade-old problem: U.S. Central Command wants carrier groups, "despite what experts say is limited public evidence that such deployments deter the United States' top geopolitical adversary in the region: Iran."

Relief on the horizon? "With experts and lawmakers alike intent on considering competition with China, might the new administration finally break the cycle of deploying the fleet beyond its means to service Central Command's demands? There's reason to believe that may be the case," Larter [writes](#). Read on, [here](#).

SHARE THIS:

NEXT STORY: [Photos Reveal Damage from Deadly Rocket Attack at US Base in Iraq](#)

Climate Change Is Already Disrupting The Military. It Will Get Worse, Officials Say

If China And The US Claim The Same Moon-Base Site, Who Wins?

Globe-Spanning Wargame Puts New Naval Concepts To The Test

What Will Decrease Training Deaths? More Training, GAO Says

Defense One Ebook: The US Military's Quest For 50

Defense One Ebook: Future Of The Army

Get all our news and commentary in your inbox at 6 a.m. ET.

Enter your email

The morning's best defense digest, from conflict to commentary.

Enter your email